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ABSTRACT

A description of trends in writing instruction in English as a second language (ESL) since 1945 is intended to inform those with little knowledge of issues and developments in the field and to persuade others of the utility of a new instructional model. The historical review of approaches looks at the theories and classroom practices relating to controlled composition, Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric, and the process approach. Criticisms and shortcomings of the approaches are examined, and an alternative is proposed. This model views ESL composition as purposeful verbal communicative interaction accounting for the basic variables of second language writing, including: (1) second language writers, (2) first language readers, (3) second language texts, (4) contexts for second language writing, and (5) the interaction of these elements in a variety of authentic ESL settings. (MSE)

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ESL Composition: An Historical Perspective

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Last year, at the CCCC convention in New Orleans, I heard a speaker, a teacher of first language composition, talk about what he did in response to what was for him a new and challenging situation—teaching writing to a group of non-native speakers of English. He prefaced his remarks by saying that in teaching this course he had purposefully avoided ESL composition practices "since all that consisted of was grammar and idiom drills." This statement disturbed me a great deal because, from my perspective, it cavalierly disregarded decades of work in ESL writing and trivialized the efforts of a great many dedicated ESL professionals. I feel that a response is in order. In this paper, I hope to demonstrate that we in ESL—though we certainly have and recognize our own theoretical and methodological limitations—have been grossly underestimated, that we have seriously considered what it means to write effectively in a second language.

This paper was written with two audiences and two aims in mind. For those who have no or little knowledge of issues and developments in ESL composition, my aim is informative. I offer what I hope is a fairly objective description of trends in ESL writing (as evidenced in the literature) since about 1945—the beginning of the modern era in

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language teaching in the USA. For those who are already familiar with the literature, my aim is persuasive. To this end I propose a tentative working model of ESL composition that I hope will function to broaden our understanding of second language writing and suggest a framework and direction for future efforts. The balance of the paper will include then an identification, description and analysis of trends in ESL composition, an assessment of the current state of affairs, and a discussion of the proposed model and its possible consequences.

I will begin my discussion of the trends in ESL composition with controlled composition, which has its roots in Charles Fries' oral approach, the precursor of the audiolingual method. Undergirding this approach were the notions that language is speech (from structural linguistics) and learning is habit formation (from behaviorist psychology). Given these basic notions it is not surprising that this approach regarded writing as a secondary concern, essentially as reinforcement for oral habits. In his Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language (1945), Fries addressed writing as an afterthought, stating that "even written exercises might be part of the work" (p.8) of the second language learner.

Some, like Erazmus (1960) and Briere (1966), believed that these written exercises should take the form of free composition, that is, writer-originated discourse, to extend the language control of the student and to promote fluency in writing. However, such free composition was soundly rejected by others, like Pincas (1962), who believed it to be "a naive traditional view...in direct opposition to the expressed ideals of scientific habit-forming teaching methods" (p.185). She

developed this point by explaining that "the reverence for original creativeness dies hard. People find it difficult to accept the fact that the use of language is the manipulation of fixed patterns; that these patterns are learned by imitation; and that not until they have been learned can originality occur in the manipulation of patterns or in the choice of variables within the patterns" (p.186).

Pincas's seemed to be the majority opinion, and what resulted was an approach to ESL composition that was concerned primarily with formal accuracy and correctness, employing rigidly controlled programs of systematic habit formation designed to avoid errors ostensibly caused by first language interference and to positively reinforce appropriate second language behavior. The approach preferred practice with previously learned discrete units of language to talk of original ideas, organization and style, and its methodology involved the imitation and manipulation (substitutions, transformations, expansions, completions, etc.) of model passages carefully constructed and graded for vocabulary and sentence patterns.

In essence, the controlled composition approach views writing as, in the words of Rivers (1968), "the handmaid of the other skills," which "must not take precedence as the major skill to be developed" (p.241) and must be "considered as a service activity rather than an end in itself" (p.258). It views learning to write as an exercise in habit formation. The writer is simply a manipulator of previously learned language structures. The reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor or proofreader, not especially interested in quality of ideas or expression, but primarily concerned with formal linguistic features. The text becomes a collection of sentence patterns and vocabulary items,

a linguistic artifact, a vehicle for language practice. The writing context is the ESL classroom. There is negligible concern for such matters as audience, purpose, culture, situation and discourse community.

The mid-sixties brought an increasing awareness of ESL students' needs with regard to producing extended written discourse. This awareness led to suggestions that controlled composition was not enough, that there was more to writing than building grammatical sentences, that what was needed was a bridge between controlled and free writing. This vacuum was filled by an approach built around notions borrowed from what is now known as the current traditional paradigm in first language composition and reinforced by Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric, in which Kaplan defined rhetoric quite narrowly as "the method of organizing syntactic units into larger patterns" (1967:15) and suggested that second language writers "employ a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violate the expectations of the native reader" (1966:4). In other words, first language interference was not limited to the sentence level, and therefore "more pattern drill, but at the rhetorical level rather than at the syntactic level" (Kaplan 1967:15) was called for.

The central concern of this approach was the logical arrangement of sentences to form paragraphs and essays. The primary focus in this arrangement was paragraph development, which included attention to paragraph elements (notions of topic sentence, support sentence, concluding sentence, and transitions), paragraph development (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, partition, classification,

definition, cause and effect). Another focus was essay development, actually an expansion of paragraph principles to larger stretches of discourse. Addressed here were larger structural entities (introduction, body, conclusion) and organizational patterns (narration, description, exposition, argumentation), with exposition typically seen as the pattern most appropriate for use by university-level second language writers. The main objective of this approach, succinctly stated by Kaplan (1966) was "to provide the student with form within which he may operate" (p.20).

Classroom procedures associated with this approach force students to focus on form. At their simplest, they ask students to choose among alternative sentences within the context of a given paragraph or longer discourse. Another variety involves reading and analyzing a model and then applying the structural knowledge gained to a parallel piece of original writing. The most complex types ask students (already provided with a topic) to list and group relevant facts, derive topic and supporting sentences from these facts, assemble an outline and write their composition from that outline.

In short, from the perspective of this approach, writing is the arrangement of sentences in prescribed patterns, and learning to write is finding out what the admissible patterns are and practicing using them. The writer is someone who selects content and matches it to form, usually to inform, but sometimes to persuade the reader. The reader is someone who is confused and probably annoyed by unfamiliar patterns of expression. The text is a collection of paragraphs and larger discourse patterns, essentially the five-paragraph essay. Finally, the context

for writing are the essay tasks commonly believed to be set for students by American university professors, primarily those in the liberal arts and humanities.

The ascendance of the process approach to ESL composition seems to have been motivated by a dissatisfaction with the two previously mentioned approaches. Many felt that neither of these approaches adequately fostered thought or its expression—that controlled composition was largely irreleveant to this goal and that the traditional rhetorical approach's linearity and prescriptivism discouraged original, creative thinking and writing. Those who, like Taylor (1981), felt that "writing is not the straightforward plan-outline-write process that many believe it to be" (pp.5-6) looked to first language composing process research for new ideas, assuming with Zamel (1982), that "ESL writers who are ready to compose and express their ideas use strategies similar to those of native speakers of English" (p.203). The assumptions and principles of the approach were soon enunciated. The composing process was seen as a "non-linear, exploratory, and generative process whereby writers discover and reformulate their ideas as they attempt to approximate meaning" (Zamel 1983:165). Consideration of the writer's purpose and audience were deemed essential. Guidance through and intervention in the process were seen as preferable to control, that is, the premature imposition of organizational patterns. Content, ideas and the need to communicate would determine form. In essence, "the communication of ideas becomes primary, and the rest is truly peripheral" (Raimes 1983: 259).

Translated into the classroom context, this approach calls for

providing a positive, encouraging, collaborative environment, within which students, with ample time and minimal interference, can work through their composing processes. The teacher's role is to help students develop viable strategies for getting started (finding topics, establishing audience and purpose, generating ideas and information, focusing and planning structure and procedure), for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), and for revising (adding, deleting, modifying ideas; rearranging; and editing—with attention to vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar and mechanics.

In short, from a process perspective, writing is a complex, recursive and creative process or set of behaviors that is similar in its broad outlines for first and second language writers. Learning to write entails becoming familiar and comfortable with one's own composing processes. The writer is the center of attention—someone engaged in the discovery and expression of meaning; the reader focuses on content, ideas and the negotiation of meaning and is not overly preoccupied with form. The text is a product—a derivative, secondary concern, whose form is a function of its content and purpose. Finally, there is no particular context implicit in this approach; it is the responsibility of individual writers to identify and appropriately address the particular task, situation, discourse community and sociocultural setting in which they are involved.

While the process approach has been generally well and widely received in ESL composition, it is not without its critics. These critics have focused on perceived theoretical and practical problems and omissions of the approach and have suggested that the focus of ESL

composition be shifted from the writer to the social context for writing. To date, this criticism (perhaps most accurately characterized as an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) orientation) seems to be as much a reaction to the process approach as an attempt to construct a new and distinct approach to ESL composition.

One major criticism of the ESL process approach is that it does not adequately address some central issues in ESL writing. Reid (1984a, 1984b) has suggested that the approach neglects to seriously consider variations in writing processes due to differences in individuals, writing tasks, and situations; the development of schemata for academic discourse; language proficiency; level of cognitive development; insights from the study of contrastive rhetoric; and differences between writing in a first and second language.

Critics also question whether the process approach realistically prepares students for academic work. According to Horowitz (1986a), the approach "creates a classroom situation that bears little resemblance to the situations in which (students' writing) skills will eventually be exercised" (p.144). He goes on to suggest that a process orientation ignores certain types of important academic writing tasks (particularly essay exams), and that two basic tenets of the process approach—"content determines form" and "good writing is involved writing" do not necessarily hold true in many academic contexts. He further states that a process oriented approach "gives students a false impression of how university writing will be evaluated" (1986a:143). In essence, it is asserted that the process approach overemphasizes the individual's psychological functioning and neglects the sociocultural context,

that is, the realities of academia; that, in effect, the process approach operates in a sociocultural vacuum.

The alternative proposed involves a primary focus on academic discourse genre and the range and nature of academic writing tasks, aimed at helping to socialize the student into the academic context and thus "ensure that student writing falls within...(the) range...of acceptable writing behaviors dictated by the academic community" (Horowitz 1986b:789).

In brief, from an EAP orientation, writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable at an American academic institution, and learning to write is part of becoming socialized to the academic community—finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it. The writer is pragmatic and oriented primarily toward academic success, meeting standards and requirements. The reader is a seasoned member of the hosting academic community who has well-developed schemata for academic discourse and clear and stable views of what is appropriate. The text is a more or less conventional response to a particular task type which falls into a recognizable genre. The context is, of course, the academic community and the typical tasks and situational constraints associated with it.

The foregoing seems to indicate that ESL composition faces a couple of serious and related problems: one of perspective and one of attitude. The perspective problem is a matter of focus. Because each of the approaches mentioned rather narrowly limits its attention to a single (albeit important) element of composition—grammar, organization, process and context, respectively—none of them gives us a realistic

picture of the complexity of second language writing. The attitude problem is a matter of bandwagonism, of embracing each new approach and rejecting it prematurely when difficulties inevitably arise. The result is a loss of those legitimate insights that even a severely limited approach has to offer and, consequently, a lack of a coherent body of knowledge about ESL writing.

It seems that to get off this approach merry-go-round and begin to consolidate and integrate our ideas, we need a bigger picture. I believe we need to construct a model of ESL composition as purposeful verbal communicative interaction, a model that accounts for, at least, the basic elements or variables of second language writing. These elements include: (1) second language writers (their processes, linguistic ability, sociocultural background, motivation, world knowledge, expectations, and purposes); (2) first language readers (their reading processes, their linguistic, cultural, experiential and cognitive characteristics, and their reactions to second language writers and their texts); (3) second language texts (print code conventions, lexical features, syntactic characteristics, intersentential relations, discourse structures, and text types); (4) contexts for second language writing (the second language culture and society, the particular discourse community, writing situation, and task); and finally (5) the interaction of these elements in a variety of authentic ESL settings.

Such a model can be used not merely to develop criteria with which to analyze approaches (as I have done here today), but also to help in drawing, in a systematic, principled and constructive way, on information and insights from source disciplines (first language

composition, rhetoric, linguistics, psychology), to help in specifying a coherent research agenda, to construct a body of relevant knowledge and derive a set of working principles; in short, to move toward a realistic and viable theory of second language writing. In this way, those of us in ESL composition can enhance our professional credibility, help our students attain academic and personal success, and let our friends and colleagues at CCCC know that we do more than grammar and idiom drills.

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